

# Vasu Sojitra - "ninjasticking" for a more inclusive outdoors...

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

vasu, justin, disability, bozeman, people, spaces, creating, push, disabled, folks, montana, outdoor, learning, based, friends, incredibly, conservation, life, happening, identity

00:01

Vasu: There's research done that diverse spaces, no matter how much time it takes to get to a middle ground like art, way more beneficial to society.

00:16

Justin: This is A New Angle. And I'm your host, Justin Angle, marketing professor at the University of Montana College of Business. This podcast is my chance to speak with cool people doing awesome things in and around the great state of Montana. We are proudly underwritten by first security bank and Blackfoot. Hey folks, welcome back. And thanks for tuning in. Today I speak with Sue tsujita, a professional athlete and activist based in Bozeman, Montana, that Sue is driving an important dialogue about diversity, equity and inclusion in the outdoor space. And this conversation might push you to reconsider how you think about people with disabilities, conservation, and inspiration. conversations like this one can be uncomfortable. And that discomfort is important. Perhaps now more than ever, we all need to seek out perspectives that differ from our own. That's where we learn and grow, and hopefully come together to make a better society. I learned a lot speaking with the zoo, and I hope that you do too. excited for you to hear our conversation right now.

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01:41

Justin: Okay, so we're here today with by Vasu Sojitra. Vasu, thanks for coming on the

podcast.



01:26

Vasu: Yeah. Thanks for having me, Justin. Yeah, happy Indigenous Peoples Day, by the way.



01:31

Justin: Indeed, we are recording on Indigenous Peoples Day and supporting to commemorate that for sure. So, how are you doing right now? I mean, this is sort of a fraught time we're a few weeks out from the election this will roll after the election, but my guess is you got some excitement building about ski season, but also it's sort of a fraught time in this country. How are you holding up? Yeah, it's interesting. Um, I am how I tell people and my friends whenever they asked me this question is I am coexisting between grief and gratitude. And trying to keep my head above water as much as possible. So yeah, that's my that's my go to right now. Yeah, that is a great way to put it grief and gratitude and some continuum between the two. Yeah, important to think about that. So for listeners that that aren't familiar with you, you are an adaptive professional athletes sponsored by the North Face. You're an activist, you're so many things. How would you describe yourself?



02:36

Vasu: Yeah, so um, I my typical intro is. My name is Vasu Sojitra. My pronouns are he him his and I live on the lands of the unseeded lands of the Crow, Northern Cheyenne Salish Kootenai, Blackfeet, Shoshone Bannock, and many other Tribal nations, as most people know it as Bozeman, Montana, and I'm a person of color, specifically, a first generation Indian American. And I'm also a person with a physical disability, specifically a limb difference amputation of my right leg. I also identify as an athlete, an activist and advocate and all the things that put people first whether that be employment based or healthcare based, or outdoor recreation based or land protection based, whatever it may be. stewarding is always trying to put people first and putting our relations with people and our other than human beings, first and foremost over money and greed. So that's kind of our ideology when it comes down to living my life.



03:55

Justin: Yeah, and I think that is condensed very well into you know, your your, I think it's your tagline on Instagram and just sticking through the woods to bring intersectionality to the outdoors. I mean, that that kind of sums up a lot of that worldview. In an elegant way. Tell us about ninja sticking. What's that all about?



04:15

Vasu: Yeah, so that motto came about when I was climbing the Grand Teton with the with a guide and a friend, my gardener and he was watching me on these precarious ledges with like 2000 feet drops next to us. And I was just casually walking on my crutches, you know, just like making it seem like no big deal. But my heart was racing, of course, surely. And he he kind of surface this new term ninja sticking kind of stuck to it. It just kind of had this really fun ring to it. And, you know, now that I look back at it, and now I know that I incorporate it into my daily life. It's It's a, it's given me a good paradigm shift and reframing of what disability really means. And for me, I'm very much prideful of having a disability. In our society nowadays, disabilities usually looked at with pity or looked down upon, or folks with disabilities are treated as second class citizens, anything that's pretty much negative. And the idea behind that term is to make it a create some sort of paradigm shift in people's brain of like, you know, having crutches is not a big deal. It's just how we utilize it, and how what resources are available to us to be able to utilize them. Same goes with wheelchairs, same goes with other disabilities, as well, and books that use other medical equipment. But that's the idea behind ninja sticking. And then, of course, the other jargon within the phrase is intersectionality, which incorporates a lot of different identity spaces into our society in a way that's either oppressive to those identity spaces, or provides privilege to those identity spaces. So just understanding the slight nuances that come with a lot of those, whether it be you know, black, queer, gay, disabled, any of those, any, any groups, there's a lot of different variations that can be created, and a lot of different oppressive systems that can impact our livelihood. So just incorporating that. And of course, given that I'm a outdoor athlete, and activists and predominantly spend my time on the lens, on trail, on my ski, whatever, I try to focus a lot of that paradigm shifting energy based around systems of oppression into the outdoor space. So that's kind of the breakdown of my little motto that I've created.



06:51

Justin: Sure, and so let's, let's, um, let's dig a little deeper into that, you know, the mindset with regard to your disability. I mean, you lost your leg very early in life. And I've heard you speak about the role your brother played and kind of just pushing you to do stuff. And how did you get to a point where we're kind of you are today in terms of your outlook on on

the way you approach what your body can and can't do?



07:20

Vasu: Yeah, my brother was a big, big advocate. He was my first ally, before I even know what the hell ally really never. And he was kind of a co conspirator, he would stand for me, stand with me whenever shit hit the fan kind of thing. And people were bullying me or talking crap about me. So he was always there. For me, he still is always here for me, even though he lives in Brooklyn, couple 1000 miles away. So yeah, that was that was incredibly important, we would spend a lot of time outside together with other friends in the neighborhood. And, yeah, he was, he was more around the tough love scenes. So if I had fallen, he told me to get up on my own. Or, if we were going on a steep run on the ski hill, he would tell me just like, you know, you can do this, like, just get up and try again, kind of thing, which helped build a stronger backbone for me and some thicker skin when it came to navigating different spaces. And that's kind of the that's kind of the concept I've brought into my daily life to other folks as well, trying to, you know, incorporate mountain culture into day to day culture. So that's, that's where my brother has a huge impact. When it came to giving me providing me a path towards self resiliency wouldn't be able to, you know, get up every, every four times I'd fallen, I'd get up five times kind of thing. So that's, that was the that was a big impetus towards me having a voice and me fighting for others to have a voice as well at the table. No, the Yeah, that was monumental. For sure.



08:58

Justin: Yeah, were there any moments where you sort of your brother didn't kind of give you any slack, if you will, and push you to do stuff do stuff for yourself? And, and what stage did you start to kind of, sort of internalize that outlook and make it your own was right from the start? Or did you kind of grow into that?



09:20

Vasu: No, it was a quite the process. But uh, yeah, it was. It took a fair amount of time. I mean, I'd say pretty much middle of college is when I really found my calling for the most part. Okay. And this is at University of Vermont up in Burlington, right? Yeah, yeah. So I was studying mechanical engineering, and I'm kind of focusing on that. And then I kind of shifted towards adaptive sports as my junior senior year came around and started focusing a lot more on my skiing, which I had no intentions of going towards the pro athlete career but things started, you know, falling into my lap and I started creating opportunities for myself. So it was a combination of the two, and my brother was definitely

one of those resources as well. And he would, he would definitely provide opportunities for me, but also, like, know, what I was capable of. And only help when I really needed it. So like either carrying food or water or something like that. But otherwise, like he said, he'd pushed me to do it all by myself, just to you know, be able to build that resiliency as I was talking about. So kind of the same thing happened. And once uh, once I started skiing one week more same process of like, no, I can do this on my own, I just need a few different resources, whether that be different equipment, or different gear that's not really out on the market. So we have to create it ourselves. Myself. So it is quite the learning curve, when it came down to me because it was all just like brand new. And I was kind of inventing my own back country ski methods.



11:05

Justin: Yeah, and I'm sure in the midst of studying mechanical engineering, it's sort of a fun kind of thing to be constantly tinkering with how to get your system optimized, I would imagine.



11:17

Vasu: Yeah, I do, I did really enjoy it always, you know, think I could make it better or fix it or, you know, I'm always trying to find solutions to barriers or problems that might come up. So that was a, that has been fun. That was fun in the process. You know, I still run into barriers and things like that, either societal you're emotionally or psychologically or physically, and just trying to figure out different ways of creating solutions around how to make that resource available. So yeah, that that was a big, another monumental shift in my life when I started pushing myself in that country.



12:02

Justin: Yeah. And at what point did you connect with Vermont adaptive?



12:06

Vasu: That was senior year of college. Okay. I was volunteering down at the Lake Champlain docks and they're like a kayaks, you know, weekly kayak program, and I was helping out during the summer and the director for that program was also the director for the ski program and sugar bush. And she offered to offered an internship program for me and I was, like, sure, sweet, like get to see and try to make a difference and kind of get

paid. might as well give it a shot. I wasn't really doing anything that went there. I was trying to figure out my life after after I graduated. And yeah, I kind of just kick started a new new career for me based off of that. And so did that.



13:00

Justin: Like, what was the what was the path from there to Bozeman and now you're starting to kind of get some pub as a skier, you had a film that got pretty widely circulated. And then what was the kind of the dots that led you to Bozeman



13:14

Vasu: Um, it was one of my friends. He really wanted to move out west and I wanted to move out west just for a little bit, just to test out some of the skiing out here. And he was like, his name is Alex. And he Alex was dead set on moving to Bozeman. And I'm like, yeah, sure, whatever. Like, I had gotten a job in Park City, but then I started researching what parts Park City was. And I was like, I don't really want to live in, you know, a super bougie place, whatever. I want to live in a town like, kind of like Burlington, you know. So um,yeah, we did a little bit of research on Bozeman, but it was pretty much sight unseen. And we got here and I was like, Oh, this is this time, like, ski hills 15 miles away. And to college town. There's actually it's not just like tourists spaced. And there's a lot more going on here. So yeah, pretty much stayed here, applied, started working at Eagle, Mount Bozeman and adaptive sports organization in town here. And I told myself, I was going to stay for two years and six years later, I'm still here. So it's kind of a kind of sucked me in a little bit. But all good. I've learned so much from working at Eagle Mountain. And in you know, helping start a different organization as well. So Oh, part of the process?



14:34

Justin: Yeah. What's the what's the state of play at Eagle Mountain right now? Are you able to run much programming with COVID? Are you had to really sort of change what you're doing?



14:43

Vasu: Um, so I'm not actually affiliated with Eagle Mountain anymore. I was no longer



14:46

Justin: Okay. Why? Because of COVID.



14:48

Vasu: There's a lot of funding issues and a lot of the program stuff or like go just because program wasn't running throughout the summer. So yeah, I'm kind of actually shifting gears entirely. Because I've been wanting to step down from Eagle mount, and this kind of pretty much created decision for me. Yeah, I've been, I've been seeking out grad school. I'm not sure what's going to happen here, but eventually go to grad school. But right now mostly focusing on advocacy and, um, my professional athlete career. So we kind of the two branches I've been spending most of my energy on and building different businesses based around diversity, equity inclusion within the outdoor space.



15:34

Justin: Yeah. So let's talk about that advocacy work. You've been pretty outspoken about the, you know, equity in general, but particularly in the outdoors in the outdoor industry. How did you come in to find your voice as a as an activist?



15:51

Vasu: So what I'm hearing is, how did I become radical?



15:55

Justin: I thought, I don't know if I'm suggesting that. I mean, I think that that, how did you get to a point where you just decided I want to dedicate my life to Yeah, getting the word out about what I believe in, whether it's radical or not.



16:08

Vasu: Um, it was definitely working in Vermont, adaptive and Berg working at Eagle mount definitely helped sculpt an idea in my brain around disability, and what, what people and families and folks with disabilities really go through. I mean, I personally have lived experience as someone with a disability, but my lived experience is not the same as others, and I personally know, like, I have financial resources compared to a lot of other

folks. So you know, learning about that was a huge aspect and pushing myself towards more the advocacy world, like just talking to the participants that come skiing or camp to the camps or their family members or caregivers, whoever like just hearing about the struggles that they're going through, especially in such an affluent town like Bozeman, just hearing like they're still, you know, poor is poor, no matter where you are. So, you know, there's just yeah, expressing those concerns and issues that they're running into. And that was a huge part of like, understanding systemically what was happening to folks with disabilities. And then another friend of mine, Nikki Bailey, was adamant about trying to diversify her spread group, as well as have a stronger understanding of racial issues as well. So and I was kind of, in that space throughout, primarily, again, disability, but started dabbling in race a little bit. And then we kind of started volunteering for local organizations that were that were fighting for racial justice, and started learning a lot more about that I started learning a lot more about it, reading, listening to podcast, going to different spaces, or affinity spaces, whether it be you know, the Indian, South Asian club on campus, or the Black Student Union, or American Indian Council, any of these spaces that are open to the public and was able to go and just like learn, listen, understand. And then we were reached out to you by that organization, Montana racial equity project about issues around the outdoors when it came to bipoc, black indigenous people of color. And we based around a conversation at that organizations table, we created an organization called earthtone, outside mt to elevate people of color in the outdoors, here in Montana, specifically the garden Valley. And that kind of pushed me into the more racial justice, social justice world of the outdoors. And I started connecting a lot more with different National Space spaces, like Indigenous women height, brown girls climb, you know, brothers of climbing, all these other spaces. What, after Asian, so like, all these faces, we just started connecting online through Instagram. And, yeah, they do a ton of different meetups and different festivals and events. And while that was all happening, I was connecting with North bass and North bass was pushing for di stuff and is still pushing for di stuff. And I was able to kind of combine those efforts to be able to build my voice around a lot of that.



19:42

Justin: And what was your experience, you know, thinking just about your kind of personal learning as you're exposing yourself to these other groups learning more about these people and their experiences and their perspective and where their perspective comes from? I mean, it sounds like you've you've had the courage to put yourself in some learning spaces where maybe you're less comfortable, and you're forced to confront some of your own worldview can talk about that, like how to have this experience push you.





20:11

Vasu: Yeah, I mean, um, I definitely put myself into spaces that I didn't identify with. So like, I would mean, my friend Nikki would really incorporate ourselves into the queer community, they were doing a lot of events, whether it be speaking engagements, or like, or speaking series, or movies, or dancing or drag shows, anything like that, we would really just like, put ourselves in those situations, it was slightly uncomfortable at the start, because I didn't really know too much about the queer culture. So that was, that was a definitely a, an eye opening experience. And I'm still learning about it, because I do not identify within that community. But yeah, it was a it was definitely eye opening experience, I was very much open to am open to learning. And it was a it was a great way to like get out of my bubble, that Bozeman tends to create that a lot of these mountains tend to create and, um, we mostly stick around, not diverse groups, but mostly user groups. So like, all this gears stick to the skiers, all the climbers stick to the climbers, all the runners stick to the runners kind of thing. But there's not a lot of cross, cross pollinating when it comes to actual diversity, which includes race, ethnicity, sex, gender, disability, socioeconomic status, all that kind of stuff. So, um, so that was a, that was definitely a good learning experience, I got called out constantly, and I still get called out constantly, which is fine. I, you know, I'm very much okay being uncomfortable in when people are, you know, trying to hold me accountable. So, yeah, that that definitely helped build that muscle up a lot more. At first, it was definitely way more uncomfortable, of course, but you know, it's takes a slow process to like, get used to that and make sure like, it's not based around ego. When it comes when people are calling folks out about these problematic behaviors. It's more just based on like, we want you to be more compassionate. So please understand what we're going through. So we can work together.



22:20

Justin: A New Angle is brought to you by first security bank and Blackfoot, two cool companies doing awesome things all over Montana. Hi, this is Mike Morelli, director of the entertainment management program at the University of Montana, and you are listening to a new angle.



22:37

Vasu: So that that was the idea that shifted in my brain throughout that process.



22:42

Justin: Yeah. Is there a particular memory that stands out as moment where that kind of exchange was effective?



22:48

Vasu: Yes. So I, there was a speaker that came for Montana racial equity project, and they, they pronounced a word wrong. And I had the audacity to raise my hand and try to correct this person. And this person was a woman, black woman of color. And given our racial systems and patriarchal misogynistic systems that are in play, my intentions did not overlap with the impact of me trying to correct this individual, it definitely 100% came off as mansplaining. And that was incredibly problematic on my behalf. And I was very much aware of it after the fact I did that. And I was like, Oh, crap. Um, but of course, it happened. And I had regret. And people call me out on it. And I learned from it, and I made sure to never do it again. So that was the process. It was definitely uncomfortable as hell. That's no, yeah. They realize like, Nah, I have to sit with this discomfort and learn from it and make sure I don't do it again.



23:59

Justin: Yeah, and I like how you put that, you know, intentions didn't align with impact. Talk about that a little bit more. What do you mean by intentions and impact? And how do they differ?



24:08

Vasu: Yeah, like, you know, my intentions, were just like, Oh, you know, given that I like things pronounced correctly within my culture. Like, I think it'd be nice if everyone was able to do that, right. So like, that was my intention was like, Oh, I just want to make sure like, we're pronouncing this correctly. So we're respecting this culture, but given my identity as a, as a man of color, and trying to like, puff my chest out or whatever, to like, correct as individuals, a woman of color. It's the impact of it came off, as, you know, part of a patriarchal misogynistic system where I was trying to hold power over her, making her feel inferior to what I knew or the knowledge I had. So that was that, in hindsight, it was incredibly problematic. It was definitely a learning experience. Unfortunately, that learning experience came at the emotional burden to a woman of color. So, after I realized that I've been intentionally in my life, trying to make sure I don't ever create learning experiences for myself, based off other people's relived trauma.



25:32

Justin: Yeah, it makes me think about I can't remember which interview it was with you, but we talking about this concept of inspiration. And you know, that it's, there's a lot of problems associated with the notion of an able bodied person looking at a disabled person as inspirational in ways that had not occurred to me, can you can you talk about that, but inspiration versus motivation, and kind of how we, you know, can draw messages from others in ways that maybe don't objectify them? Or what's the healthy way forward through that area?



26:09

Vasu: Well, so first off, I would say, do for vocabulary sake, like people with disabilities is the correct vernacular for most, okay, um, that don't identify with a disability just because like, in our space and time in our society, like, currently, people are still people with disabilities are still looked at as inferior. So people with disabilities come off a little bit more compassionate, that that phrasing just comes off a little bit more compassionate. I personally switch between that person first language with identity first. So like, I call myself a disabled person, but that's what the capital D, mostly because again, I'm very prideful of having a disability. And that, that I only allow my friends to call me once they realize that disability is not a bad thing.



27:02

Justin: Hmm. So they have to earn that right?



27:06

Vasu: And so what you're saying a little bit, kind of, I mean, they have to prove it through their actions that, like, they understand that disability is part of human biology. And it's part of the diversity spectrum of how people develop throughout our lives and in society. So once we figure out like, you know, disability is not the problem, it's how we provide access to folks that have different different abilities. So like, how, how do we do that? So that's, that's the kind of the concept, I'm not trying to be a gatekeeper. That's just like, the idea that I worked around, like, you know, I, I mostly call it my disabled friends disabled friends with a capital D, just because I know that they're prideful of having a disability or if they're not, then I don't, that's pretty much it. You know, it's, it's asking how they want identify. But anyways, back now I get it.



28:02

Justin: That's an important. I mean, that's an important distinction that I had never occurred to me, but it's a it's a subtle piece of language difference that that has great meaning. And I think it's, as you said, it's incumbent upon all of us to kind of learn from that stuff and understand the implications of these language choices.



28:19

Vasu: Yeah, it's an identity first language is a way to reclaim our identity. It's kind of how the queer community took back the word queer, because it was derogatory back in the day. So it was a kind of, yeah, kind of the same, same there. And, yeah, I mean, like, you know, you, you go into spaces, like, you know, the deaf community is the same, they don't want to be called people that are deaf, they want to be called deaf people with a capital D. Same with the blind community, they want to be called blind people with a capital B, so like, all these insane with, like, you know, not disabled, but indigenous people, they want to be called indigenous people with a capital I. So it's like, you know, just reclaiming these identities in a way that's positive, and, you know, part of our ecosystem, and once you realize, like, Oh, yeah, you know, they're people, these are their identities, they hold power in those identities, like, then we can start like, really being in solidarity with them with the language that comes with identity first. Yeah, and I think that distinction is, is is really powerful. I mean, people sort of throw their hands up in the air and say, Oh, you know, I didn't use the right word or the right pronoun or the right this or that, and they're sort of retreating to this place of what what they sort of feel is safety, but it to me, it doesn't acknowledge that language is reflective of a lot of power structures, right. And you might feel like, your language choices are just normal, but they're reflective of a certain you know, a certain hierarchy, if you will, and what you're talking about is some. The implications of that, and then some of the efforts of a lot of these communities to, as you say, positively reclaim territory that's that is their own.



30:07

Justin: Right. Exactly. Yeah.



30:09

Vasu: And, and it's a, it's definitely a slow process, but Sure. When it works, it's, it's pretty influential in creating more power in these spaces.



30:21

Justin: So let's Yeah, so let's go back to that inspiration motivation piece if you are you willing to kind of touch on that? Yeah, a little bit.



30:29

Vasu: Sure. Yeah. Um, so yeah, the word inspiration is very loaded within the disability world. And it's evolved heavily throughout the past couple decades, just because of disabled folks having access to a lot of different resources, which is great. But on the other hand, still not having those same access. It's getting there with the ADA and a lot of these adaptive equipment. But yeah, it's, it's definitely evolved. And especially in the outdoor or athletic world. Most people look at adaptive athletes as inspirational just because I, I really think most non disabled people don't really know what else to say, other than that word, because it's been constantly dug into us to be that disabled people are looked at as and it's incredibly objectifying. You know, we're not out here. We're not out here to motivate non disabled people to continue to live their life and in a very inspiring way, I guess. Were out here to just push our bodies, just like any other athlete, any other person with the resources that we have available. So for me, it's my ninja sticks or my crutches. And that's kind of the idea that I'm going behind in Peru. And I was talking to a friend Antos like, you know, if, if you're inspired by me, then try to break down the ecosystems that are keeping more folks with disabilities off of the trails, or break down the ablest systems that are, you know, not providing the right health care to folks with disabilities or the right education or still segregating folks with disabilities from non disabled spaces. Like, if you're inspired by me, some do that, you know, instead of trying to focus on your life, it's not what I'm doing is not to center your needs, it's to center the needs of the disabled community. That's kind of the idea behind the loaded, evolved term of inspiration or fire.



32:43

Justin: Yeah. 100%. That makes a ton of sense. And, you know, it makes me think about you, this might be a nice transition to your work with the North Face being picked up as I believe that first adaptive athlete, is that is that correct? Your first adaptive athletes sponsored by the North Face?



33:00

Vasu: Yeah, it's kind of like a bittersweet title. But yeah, exactly. Yeah, you would go out.

Yeah. But it's also like shit 2018 and I'm the first disabled athlete book. Right?



33:11

Justin: What was the I'm trying to remember the Ruth Bader Ginsburg quote, or maybe it was a Sandra Day O'Connor quote, like, you know, when will When Will there be enough women on the Supreme Court? And, you know, she said, when there are nine of them or something like that?



33:24

Vasu: Well, yeah, exactly.



33:27

Justin: Yeah, let me let's let's talk about that. Because, you know, the outdoor industry has plenty of issues, plenty of work to do. We can talk about that work. But, you know, the north face has been, to the extent that good work is doable. North Face has been doing some good work, and you've chosen to affiliate with that brand. Talk about that opportunity and that decision.



33:49

Vasu: Yeah, totally. So that that came on behalf of building relations with Conrad anchor here in Bozeman. He's a Bozeman local to that. That was kind of coincidental. I had no idea he lived here. Until, you know, someone said he does. I was like, Oh, cool. Who is he? So that was like, that was like, seven, eight years ago. So I wasn't really sure. But um, and then of course, now I'm like, close friends with him and his family. And he definitely pushed me to be on the North Face team. And it's an incredibly amazing opportunity. And I'm very much grateful for it and you know, it's a they are very much open to feedback especially because they haven't worked with many disabled athletes before adaptive athletes before so which I'm very much also grateful for that they are wanting to incorporate my voice and a lot of these more strategic planning ideas around a lot of their content. So yeah, excited to see how that all grows and comes to and how to incorporate more disabled voices or and or like different ethnicities and race and gender and sexuality. So, yeah, super cool that they're open to a lot of that feedback and already doing that work behind the scenes with their diversity inclusion team, really putting their, you know, walking the talk and putting their money where their mouth is kind of thing with

supporting a lot of bipoc organizations and adapt organizations and queer led organizations. So really awesome that they are doing that kind of work. Yeah.



35:27

Justin: Can you talk about some of the initiatives in particular? I mean, it goes much further than just sort of? Well, I mean, it's, it's, it's important to be thoughtful about how the imagery you represent in your marketing materials, that has a lot of impact. But beyond that, what what, what sort of things is the north face up to?



35:47

Vasu: Um, so they have a full yearly audit that they do, and I can definitely share with you that but so they are underneath the Vf Corp, Vanity Fair? Yep. And Vanity Fair is the one with the D. WC in equity or diversity inclusion office. And they are, you know, North Bay specifically have an explorer grant. It's called the Explorer fund that provides, you know, funds and resources to primarily underserved communities, which is awesome. They're in the works for a lot of different initiatives around that, that I can't really talk about right now. Because it's kind of a hush hush, but yeah, more focused on that explorer fund. And the biggest part, I keep, you know, hearing in within the bipoc community is like we're looking for better or not better, but we're looking for mentorship, and how to be better at what we do. And that's kind of the next step for northface. And creating mentorship opportunities for a lot of bipoc youth. So that's, that's super awesome. And I'm excited to see that they Vf and North base and all the other branches, utilize as a go source material, as well as, you know, distribution and production processes. So that's really cool. Once I figured out, you know, once COVID is slowing down, hopefully, I would love to check out some of their factories overseas, and just see how folks are, you know, incorporated within the Vf model and TNF model. So, it seems like they're really creating opportunities for a lot of their workers and focusing on a lot of the sex trafficking that might happen in a lot of south southeast Asian countries. So really cool. And, you know, focusing on more women of color leadership, and, you know, bipoc leadership, they have a pretty solid 2030 plan of having 5050 women leaders, and also around honestly, between 20 to 30, bipoc leaders within Vf and TNF. So that's a, that's pretty cool to see that they're trying to really push for equitable leadership when it comes to a lot of these structures. Well, I mean, the list goes on, but those are kind of just the highlights that I remember.



38:23

Justin: Sure. And one of the I mean, one of the areas that you see focused on a lot by outdoor industry, marketing and outdoor industry, folks in general, is the the issue of public lands and conservation. This conservation concept is is problematic, in some ways. I mean, it's not necessarily an Indigenous concept. Talking about your feelings about conservation.



38:52

Vasu: Yeah, I don't really use that word anymore. is the thing just because the word conservation is also incredibly loaded and based around racial structures that completely cut out indigenous way of stewarding the lands? And I mean, no conservation was, you know, what, john Muir era. And once you look back at john Muir's, like legacy, or whatever you want to call it, like, yes, he was incredibly racist, especially towards indigenous people, calling him the S word and just like not acknowledging the amount of work that they've put into providing a reciprocal ecosystem. So, yeah, that, that I've definitely pushed away from and I mostly stick to like environmentalism or stewardship. And that's kind of the the problematic, you know, concept is like a lot of these conservation quote unquote conservation organizations are based on john Muir's idea of what conservation is, you know, we, we have you know, it's it's strange like, in the US, we compartmentalize everything. And conservation is in its own bubble, outdoor recreation is in another bubble. urban areas is another bubble bubble, but it's like, you know, once we start realizing that just being outside in green spaces and outdoor spaces is healing for all community members, that's when we start realizing, stewarding any land, whether it be urban, or rural, or you know, wilderness or whatever, is going to be beneficial for everyone. And, you know, once we start realizing that it's super, it's gonna, it's gonna be a huge shift. And I think most of its going to start from indigenous leaders really focusing their land based practices into a lot of these problematic organizations, or creating their own, which I've started seeing as well. So yeah, there's definitely a huge shift happening within that space.



40:56

Justin: What do you think those but you mentioned these bubbles? Right? Why do you think these bubbles exists? Is it just the market forces that drive it the way our society sort of structured? Or is it something about people like what what do you think's going on there?



41:08

Vasu: I don't know. I always, so any relationship, I always bring back to power and control.



Okay? Whether that be you know, a romantic relationship, or friendship or relationship with your boss, or whatever it may be. So it's like I, the way my brain works is like, I'm looking at these spaces that are incredibly white, incredibly privileged, like, most of them just want to keep their power and control to what they have. And continue, continue that complacency, which in itself is incredibly racist and cause continues the ball of racism to roll down the hill. Whereas if we started branching out to these different organizations, and different identity spaces, and communities, like that power and control will have would have to be distributed. And I don't think people want to lose that. You know, that's the hard part is like losing privilege. And losing power is incredibly uncomfortable. Like I, you know, we, we won't have our hot tubs or Mazda rotties, or whatever it may be, if we do lose our power and control.



42:18

Justin: Yeah, I mean, it, it certainly relies on some incredible altruism, altruism at the end at the level of the individual. And you wonder, like, Is it more addressable at the level of policy? It's hard to know what the best way for it is?



42:33

Vasu: Well, I personally think policy will be the biggest change maker possible. Yeah, that's, that's literally what has created these racial structures within the US, whether that be redlining or new Jim Crow, that's been happening with mass incarceration. So it's like, all these things are caused because of horrible racist policies that have been in place for since the US became the US, whatever in the 1400s or 1600s, whatever, whichever one you see fit, but it's, uh, yeah, once we start creating more anti racist policies, quote, like, you know, one, obvious one is the affirmative action policy for colleges. So it's like, you know, if we start creating stuff like that, that start to celebrate elevate people of color, or diverse folks like, that's when we start distributing that power and control and start creating more diverse spaces. And there's research done that diverse spaces, no matter how much time it takes to get to a middle ground, like, are way more beneficial to society, whether you know, capital or, or people's way of life, people feeling included, it's just, it's just way more beneficial. When it comes to having a more diverse leadership group space, there's a lot more voices being heard a lot of different perspectives that are being looked at. And it this quote, keeps sticking with me when my friend said it to me a few few months ago is like, you know, you pay now or you pay later. Right? Um, you know, do you want to do want to pay now to learn about race and racism and reconcile our history? Or do you want to pay later in people calling you out on your bullshit and being flagged as a racist and, you know, being problematic and no one wanting to work with you ever again. So it's like,

when, you know, when Where do you want to put your investment?



44:43

Justin: Vasu, want to be respectful your time are kind of coming up against the limit here. But before we close, I'd love to just kind of ask, you know, if there are one thing you'd want a listener who's listening to this, and maybe they're coming it has been challenged a little bit or their worldviews been rattled or whatever. They're they've learned something. What's kind of the one takeaway you'd like people to come away from this with?



45:10

Vasu: Its a great question. I always tell people to reframe politically correct. To compassionate. So that's kind of my trying to push people to come from a space of love and compassion instead of constantly questioning and being the devil's advocate when it comes to a lot of these different spaces. Yeah, you hear the term politically correct. And, you know, it's just becomes divisive really quickly, whereas compassion is pretty unequivocally a good thing, right? I don't think we can corrupt that word, necessarily. And yeah, that comes down to everything I've been talking about prior is like putting people first and language matters. Yeah, representation matters. And like, you know, it all breaks down to a lot of these little structures that we've created.



46:00

Justin: Well, that's it. This has been phenomenal. I appreciate your time, your story, your passion, the work you're doing. How can people how can people find your work online? How can people follow you?



46:11

Justin: Um, yeah, most of my stuff, given that I'm a millennial, 29 year old, mostly is focused on Instagram. So my tag is at bazoo, underscore, so g tra. So yeah, that's kind of where I do a lot of my advocacy, sharing either action items or my perspective on life or my friend's perspectives on life. And a lot of these issues that we always constantly talk about and try to find solutions for. That's my main main method.



46:43

Justin: Awesome. Well, thanks for sharing some of your time and wisdom with us. I hope at some point we got the chance to meet in person. Stay safe. Good luck this winter.



46:53

Vasu: yes, because thanks, Justin.



46:56

Justin: Thanks for listening to a new angle. We really appreciate it. A new angle is underwritten by first security bank in Blackfoot with support from the University of Montana College of Business and consolidated electrical distributors. AJ Williams is our producer, Jeff Emmett, John Wicks and BTO made our music and Jeff Meese is our master of all things sound. If you have any questions, suggestions, comments, insults, whatever, please email me at a new angle at [Newmontana.edu](mailto:Newmontana.edu). You like what you heard? Tell your friends about it. Thanks a lot. See you next time.